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George Bush's RITE OF PASSAGE

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Arnaud's Restaurant occupies a position in New Orleans' French Quarter like that of Locke-Ober in Boston: It boasts the undeniable patina of age, the determined dignity of an expensive restaurant in less-than-dignified surroundings, the steady-as-she-goes endurance of an eatery forced to put up with unsalubrious trippers from nearby (Bourbon Street on the one hand, the Combat Zone on the other), and the comforting air of a building in which for generations, rites of passage have been marked with good food, good drink, good company, and devout wishes for good fortune.

The night he was nominated for president by the Republican National Convention, George Bush took to Arnaud's a party of 63, all connected, one way or another, to his vast, extended family. It was the WASP equivalent of the Kennedy clan out for a graze. Fifteen thousand journalists trooped the sidewalks of the French Quarter that week, but neither notebook nor minicam intruded upon this family celebration, sealed off in an upstairs room, the victuals shuttled in near-record time (70 minutes) by 13 waiters. The 64-year-old head of the Bush ensemble, known variously to the family as "The Big Guy" or "Gee Bee," chose the menu: seafood gumbo, shrimp Arnaud, pompano en croute, asparagus with hollandaise, strawberries, ice cream, and cafe brulot — a festive concoction of coffee, liqueurs, and orange peel, served flambe.

It is not unusual for the Bush clan to break bread en masse. In Washington, Sunday lunch at George and Barbara's has been virtually a standing weekly invitation to any relative within hailing distance. But this was not a night like any other. One of the toasts squeezed in between the gumbo and the coffee cited Henry V's stirring speech to his doubting cousin, Westmoreland, who wished for more men on the eve of battle. The King would hear none of that; not a day will pass,

... From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remember'd;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

That choice of toasts hints at the mood of the meal and speaks volumes about the nominee. It says: To hell with those who aren't with us. It says: We may lose, but we go down fighting. And it bespeaks a tossing off of shackles. The shackles, actually, had left town the day before. On Air Force One. With Ronald Reagan.

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But Ellis says of Bush, "He went off to fight in the war and moved from the East to Midland, Texas. It was not exactly Brookline down there. Here's a guy whose formative years were spent in a rough-and-tumble existence. Then, he was so qualified for different kinds of jobs, that presidents like Ford and Nixon said, 'Let's get George to do it.' You know what the Senate is like; when the Democratic-controlled Senate Intelligence Committee says Bush did a great job straightening out the CIA, that's a great tribute."

In 1977 Bush concluded 11 months as Gerald Ford's CIA chief, after incoming president Jimmy Carter refused to grant Bush's private plea that he be allowed to continue on. Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), then chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said at the time: "You might say Bush was one of the best [CIA directors] we had. . . . The morale of the intelligence community has been inspired by Bush's leadership." Other Democrats have been considerably less complimentary about Bush's role as chief spy.

Not just relatives think Bush is a great guy. Bill Saltonstall, one of the most popular and principled of Republicans when he served as a state senator from the North Shore, was just starting at Andover when Bush left to go to war. Their fathers were associates, Republican senators from neighboring states. "Ever since George and I shared a cab to the airport coming down from an Andover alumni thing," Saltonstall said at the GOP national convention in New Orleans, "I've been a believer in this fellow. He's just a very solid guy." Andy Card, David Sparks, Ann Kramer, the late Jack Flannery and his widow, Jill Fallon, were just some of the Bay State Republicans who worked hard for Bush.

George Bush's resume is one that some call the best in politics. (Bob Dole called him "the former Mr. Everything.") Bush got into politics the same year Reagan did — 1964. Barry Goldwater was the doomed GOP presidential candidate that year, and Bush ran for the US Senate from Texas, taking the conservative route: He said maybe we should use nuclear weapons against the Vietnamese. He called Medicare "socialized medicine." He came out against the 1964 Civil Rights Act and open housing laws.

He has since repudiated all those positions. In 1964 the voters repudiated him, and Goldwater was crushed by Lyndon Baines Johnson. By 1966, less vehement in his right-wing beliefs, Bush was elected to the US House from Texas' Harris County, the first of two terms, the only office he has won on his own. In 1970 Richard Nixon asked him to run for the Senate again. He did, and lost to Sen. Lloyd Bentsen, who had licked in a primary incumbent Ralph Yarborough, the man who'd defeated Bush for the Senate six years earlier. But Nixon made Bush ambassador to the United Nations, where he received generally good reviews.

After a year in New York, Bush again heeded Nixon's call and swapped the UN job for running the Republican National Committee, where his role was to try to class up the joint after Watergate. Bush was considered for the vice presidency twice, first when Spiro Agnew was forced to resign amid bribery allegations, and then when President Gerald Ford had to replace himself. Ford sent Bush to China instead and then asked him to come home in 1975 to take over the demoralized CIA.

Bush liked the CIA job. Some people familiar with the hocus-pocus aspects of life in the Yale secret society, Skull and Bones, felt life in the CIA corresponded to the collegiate dreams of a small band of elite white males guiding the destiny of nations. Bush liked the CIA so much he offered to renounce politics for good, if only Jimmy Carter would let him stay on, according to retired CIA No. 2 man Adm. Bobby Inman. But Carter wanted his own man at Spy Central, not Richard Nixon's Republican National Committee chairman.

Bush has since gone out of his way to deride Carter in countless speeches. In his book, Bush calls the Georgian "a loner, suspicious of strangers and their motives . . . who always seemed to have his guard up." In any event, Carter did Bush a favor. Ejected from the CIA, Bush decided to take on Ronald Reagan and the rest of a large field for the 1980 Republican presidential nomination. Bush managed a major-league upset of the Gipper in the Iowa caucuses, but stumbled in New Hampshire. Bush became resigned to hoping for the vice presidential nomination.

But there was yet one more indignity to swallow. It was the fiasco of the Detroit convention. Reagan dangled the vice presidential nomination for a 24-hour period in front of Jerry Ford. Ultimately, cooler heads prevailed, and the cockeyed notion of a "co-presidency" was throttled in its cradle. Reagan was persuaded such a scheme would never work, and he turned to the next name on his list: Bush.

Twice before Bush had sought the consolation prize, from Nixon, and from Ford; now it was his. Let others scoff. For Bush, it was another rung on the ladder, and there was only one rung higher. America's preppiest politician was near the top. And for the first time in his life, Bush had achieved a rank higher than his father's.